

Correspondence | Lesley Guy

Showtime is the resulting exhibition of a recent collaborative residency at Galerie LoBe with Alison J Carr and Kerstin Honeit. The video letters work like a call and response, each one a challenge to the other. I have been invited to write this accompanying text as a friend. Three can be a crowd so I sit on the sideline and watch them play.

'Why do I do this?' she asked.
'Because you are mad' I replied
'I can back out now' she said
'No you can't' I say back.

Alison J Carr was performing her PhD research at S1 Artspace in Sheffield earlier this year. She was dressed like Sally Bowles from *Cabaret*. Reading out transcribed interviews of dancers and showgirls she took on other voices, some more, some less convincing. Alison is not an actress, so it was somewhere between a performance and no performance. It made me wonder what a performance was. I knew that under the hat her hair was pinned awkwardly. The actions were unsure, the gestures uncommitted. The awkwardness could be described as abject. And while her glamour was reflective, the gaze just bouncing off, (making it an excellent protective force), it was the flaws that let me in. By forgetting to remove her digital watch she gave me a punctum.

In costume you can pretend to be who ever you want within the safe bubble of anonymity. Maybe the ruse is the act of a predator, as a star turn, we are told, you can make a killing, the audience, hypnotised by the illusion, is the prey. In reality this ruse may constitute something more disturbing. Roger Caillois argued in his 1935 essay *Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia*, that mimicry is a dangerous luxury. Protection, he argues, seems an unlikely cause for such disguise. An animal such as a stick insect that resembles a leaf is just as likely to be eaten, either by prey which hunt by using smell or by their own kind who themselves eat leaves. This desire to break down the distinction between the self and the other, whether it is another species or the environment, is to Caillois, pathological, i.e. something other than the norm.

I'm not suggesting that Alison or Kerstin are in some way *disturbed*, their work though points me in the direction of Caillois via my own fascination with the Surrealist movement and the photographer Claude Cahun. Pre-empting the work of Cindy Sherman by around 60 years, Cahun made distinctive self-portraits using a range of theatrical costumes, disguising and altering her appearance. Provocative for the times her androgyny blurred the boundaries of gender and identity. It is a form of exploration that we today take for granted, but what Caillois

saw as pathological is this desire for imitation being taken beyond play and into a state of being where one is totally assimilated into the thing being imitated, 'Beware:' he warns us, 'whoever pretends to be a ghost will eventually turn into one' (*The Edge of Surrealism* 91). Cahun too is aware of these tensions, in her *Disavowals* of 1930, she writes, 'We cover our faces with masks then cover them again, put on make-up, then make them up again, maybe only exaggerating the resemblance to, only accentuating the imperfections of, the hidden face...it's a waste of time' (*Disavowals* 118)

In his text Caillois moves on to forms of human mimicry in a way that references to the work of anthropologist Emile Durkheim who described the mimetic rites of Australian Aboriginal tribesmen. He writes, 'the men who gather to perform these rights really believe that they are animals or plants of the species whose name they bear. They feel they have either an animal or vegetable nature, and they believe it is this nature that constitutes what is most essential and most excellent in them' (*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* 264)

I think this last bit is really important. Although Alison doesn't yet believe herself to be this thing she portrays, she wants it to be there, this excellence, this perfection. You really must believe in this sort of magic to work. There is no effect if there is even the faintest grain of doubt. It is a huge commitment: to be taken seriously one must adopt this totem for a considerable length of time, if not forever. The alternative is to be amorphous, constantly changing like Cahun. "Under this mask another mask. I will never be finished removing all these faces." (*Disavowals* 103). Cahun's project seemed to be about using the masks to strengthen her own identity, each change bringing her closer to the truth.

Different cultures have different ways of describing the truth; mimesis can be fidelity to convention rather than to nature. In *Becoming 10* from 2007-10, Kerstin is imitating what she imagines is the true nature of her 9 estranged brothers and sisters, and is in this sense creating reality. As an act of translation Kerstin becomes a physical reading of each imagined sibling. More importantly these enactments are *embodiments*, life-like simulations that might also perform a cathartic role. Becoming the thing one most desires. For Kerstin, the absence of family provided an opportunity to recreate them. Alison, in her photographic series *Les Girls*, 2007, also evokes that which is lost, through a meticulous recreation of 1940's cigarette cards showing dancers from the era.

Anthropologist Michael Taussig describes the healing and protection through the portrayal of the evil spirit. Depictions of white colonials by the Cuna people are described as petrified objects, congealed life within what they are images of (*Mimesis and Alterity* 12-13). Reading this I can't help but see both Alison and Kerstin as living fetishes. Their performed gestures seem to extend beyond the photo as if the still image can't hold the congealed life within it. After they become possessed by the image, they become living embodiment of the image. Now through the video

letter they take on the voices of others, which is an even more blatant expression of physical possession. Medieval saints were often connected to the sacred through a transformation of their physical state. It couldn't work through intellect alone. Hair had to be cut, clothes changed. St Joan was only able to fulfil her destiny by getting into drag, and the act of cutting her hair as depicted in the 1928 film is portrayed with such intensity that it is difficult not to perceive the spiritual transformation. Here faith is expressed through a physical sacrifice, a physical interaction with the materiality of the world.

In the video letter we begin to get a sense of physical abandonment. Through Kerstin, the disembodied voice tells us about its own body attacking itself through hives, and then betraying itself through an ugly blemish. Alison imitates this process, choosing a voice that loves its body, that is able to loose itself with it. Later there is an attempt to bring the body out into the open, a nervous libertine and a city slicker both uncomfortable with the terrain, at odds with the environment.

'So men came to attribute creative powers to gestures that are, in themselves, useless.' (*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* 266)

These imaginings that Durkheim describes as mimetic magic, and the physical transformations of stick insects and saints could easily be mistaken for the processes we employ as artists. I see connections between the sympathies of 'like producing like', and aesthetic correspondence. Each ingredient of an artwork can so easily change its potential readings and potential affect upon the viewer. To collaborate is to add another layer of meaning or intent. Authorship is shared. There is an awkward correspondence, not everything fits tightly, yet the work that Kerstin and Alison have made together says something to me about truth and beauty, both so slippery and androgynous in their nature.